



Yeats, Pound, Asia, and the Music of the Body

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The Meaning of the Flute in Modernist Music and Poetry

Abstract:

In June 2009 news appeared concerning a 33,000-year-old flute, found in a cave in southern Germany, made of the wing bone of a griffon vulture. The idea that the most profound art comes from the innermost recesses of the body was familiar to the Modernist poets, such as William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound. Yeats's play *The Herne's Egg* concerns a flute made from a heron's thigh-bone, and Yeats liked the bone's perspective on human life: in one poem wrote of looking at the bitter old world through a hole bored in a hare's collar-bone, and in another poem he wrote, "He that sings a lasting song / Thinks in a marrow-bone."

Pound (a composer as well as a poet) also examined the deep resonances of flute music: in his opera *Le testament*, the brothel music is played by a nose flute, and in a number of his Chinese poems flutes play uncanny roles. For example, in his translation from Li Po, "The River Song," the nightingales' song mixes into the sound of the flute, as if artifice and nature had attained a perfect counterpoint, a metaphysical unison; and in Canto 90 the flute tone comes *hoi chthonioi*, a Greek term meaning "the earth-born"—as if it were the music of spirits of the underworld. For both Yeats and Pound, flute music is at once the most celestial, the most unearthly of sounds, and also the expression of the bloodiest, most carnal life.

Before the human race came into being, there were musical instruments of a sort: for example, sea otters, floating on the backs in the ocean, poise abalone on the chests and beat open the shell with a stone. But it is doubtful that these percussive otters mean to make noise for the sake of noise; and the first instrument created with a clear intent to make music, as far as we know, was the flute.

In June 2009 news appeared concerning a 35,000-year-old flute, found in a cave in southern Germany, made of the wing bone of a griffon vulture. A researcher who made a replica of this instrument noted that he could play on it a more-or-less in-tune version of the beginning of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, which suggests that the flute's holes were arranged to play the basic intervals of Western tonal music: the third, the fifth, and the octave. All those millennia ago, the German flautist was making music that was, in some sense, already our music.

If the earliest flutes were made of bone, the flute entered mythology and history as a contrivance of reeds or hollowed wood. The Greeks tended to think of wind music as quite distinct from string music: Apollo's lyre suggested moderation, calm, the mathematical ratios of Pythagoras; wind music, on the other hand, suggested rape (as in the case of the nymph Syrinx, chased by the god Pan, her chastity saved only because she metamorphosed into reeds) or torture (as in the case of Marsyas, the satyr who challenged Apollo to a music contest, and was flayed alive after he lost). Wind music is expressive, an exercise of the mouth, like kissing itself—Athena, the goddess of wisdom, disliked the flute because it distended the cheeks and made the player ugly.

From the beginning of discourse, then, the flute has two aspects: it is nature's own voice, the voice of the wind sighing in the reeds, the voice of Pan, that is, the voice of everything—since the Greek word for *all* is *pan*. But it is also a sort of scream, the voice of sexual frustration—indeed to play a flute is almost to perform a sexual act carried out by mechanical means.

The flute's two sides—the bright and the dark—have persisted over the course of Western music. On the bright side, the flute has been the shepherd's instrument, the instrument of effortless carefree rural life. In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau—a composer as well as a philosopher—deplored the artificiality of French music, its cultivation of harmonic nuance, subtle half-tints, as opposed to the simplicity and vigor of Italian music. Rousseau's preferred instrument was the flute—and late in his career, in 1775, he transcribed for solo flute the Spring concerto from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, Op. 8, thereby reducing to utmost simplicity—one melodic line, played by the most rustic of instruments—some of the most potent Italian music of his age.

There are countless illustrations of the ways in which composers use the flute to evoke pastoral—one example is the call of the nightingale in Beethoven's sixth symphony (1808), in the movement called *Scene by the Brook*; another is maybe the most famous solo in the whole flute literature comes from the Paris version of Gluck's opera *Orphée et Eurydice* (1774), a representation of supernatural joy—blessed spirits dancing in Elysium.

But the flute was not just an instrument of nature-joy and heaven's blessing: it was also an instrument of power. In Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791), Tamino plays his flute at moments of crisis, both to express himself and to impose his will:

Wie stark ist nicht dein Zauberton!	What strength lies in your magic tone!
Weil , holde Flöte, durch dein Spielen	My flute, you ravish all, and capture—
Selbst wilde Tiere Freude fühlen.	Even the wild beasts feel the rapture.

Soon the sound of the flute will attract Tamino's beloved Pamina—it almost seems to conjure her up. This cybernetic force is in no sense dark, for Tamino's flute is strictly on the side of virtue; but as the flute expanded its repertoire of possibility, it was asked to deliver more of the Pan-ic and less of the cooey and fluttery.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the flute started to display its true dark side, Pan's pantings, his sexual urgencies. Debussy wrote very little flute music, but he nevertheless managed almost single-handedly to change the semantic character of the flute. The most conspicuous example is the faun's flute at the beginning of the *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* (1894). This was written as a kind of musical illustration to a symbolist poem by Mallarmé: a program note very possibly written by Debussy himself says that the music is “a succession of décors, across which there move the desires and dreams of the faun in the afternoon heat. Then, tired of chasing the nymphs and the naiads, he abandons himself to the drunkenness of sunlight, sated with dreams that have turned real, with his complete possession of universal nature.” The music, then, concerns sensual glut; when Nijinsky made it into a ballet, he ended his performance by rubbing the nymph's scarf over his genitals in a scandalous but appropriate gesture, for this is music of erotic fantasy, perhaps the greatest such music ever written. That notorious flute solo at the beginning of the piece moves stepwise through the interval of an augmented fourth, the tritone, a charged interval known in the Middle Ages as the *diabolus in musica*, the devil in music. Representations of the Christian devil have always been based on images of satyrs, fauns, and other hybrid creatures, half-man, half-animal, from pre-Christian mythology. And Debussy endows his faun with a tritone, a badge of devilry as obvious to a musician as a pair of horns would be to a painter. The music is languorous, hot, shimmery, slow; but it is instinct with sin.

Seven years later, in 1901, Debussy composed a sort of sonic environment for the recitation of twelve poems by Pierre Louÿs called *Chansons de Bilitis*; the music was scored for two flutes, two harps, and celesta. In the seventh of these poems, *Le tombeau sans nom* (The tomb without a name), the reciter reads the epitaph carved on the stele, and comments, “We pour no libation. For how can you summon an unknown soul from the crowds of Hades?” The music shows that the flute’s emotive possibilities include a kind of cool marmoreal grieving.

And twelve years after that, in 1913, Debussy—by now a renowned specialist in flute sex—was asked by Gabriel Mourey to write a short melodrama, *La flûte de Pan* (later published as *Syrinx*), for his play *Psyché*. In the old story, the chaste Syrinx flees from the gross importunings of Pan; her metamorphosis into a little stand of reeds leaves Pan frustrated, though so pleased by the sound of his breath over the hollow tubes that he finds a certain aesthetic consolation—as Ovid puts it in the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, in Arthur Golding’s translation:

In steade of hir he caught the Reedes newe growne upon the brooke,
And as he sighed, with his breath the Reedes he softly shooke
Which made a still and mourning noyse, with straungnesse of the which
And sweetnesse of the feeble sounde the God delighted mich ...

But in Mouret’s play a naiad, first timorous and coy, becomes so pleased with the sound of Pan’s pipes that she willingly offers him what Syrinx refused:

O Pan, the sound of your syrinx is a wine
Too fragrant, too sweet—my head grows light;
O Pan, I fear you no more, I am yours!

The flute sounds as if the naiad were faint with desire, and keeps rousing herself only to faint again.

After Debussy’s time, flute music evolved in still more Marsyan directions—away from heaven’s beatitude, toward something coldly or hotly expressive. In the nineteenth century, orchestral flutes were made of either wood or metal; but in the twentieth century, metal was predominant. As composers started to think of flutes as shaped silver, they thought less about pastoral natural scenes and more about some inhuman purity of tone, some uninflected sine wave, as if metal itself were given a grave voice. Edgard Varèse’s solo flute piece *Density 21.5* (1936) is entitled after the specific gravity of platinum, 21.5 grams per cubic centimeter—it was composed in order to inaugurate a new platinum flute. Like Debussy’s *Prélude*, the Varèse piece makes much use of the tritone, but here the tritone seems to have almost no semantic content: it doesn’t represent the devil, or sensual delight, or anything at all—it’s just an interval, just as good as any other interval, with no yearning to resolve itself into a fourth or a fifth or any other consonance. We seem to have entered a domain too hermetic, too self-enclosed, to permit any notion of consonance or dissonance. The musical composition is simply a dense object made of sound, as the flute is a dense object made of metal: long sustained notes are interrupted by shrill frills, like solid planes onto which curlicues are attached: here music seems to approximate the condition of sculpture. The transverse flute is, of all musical instruments, the most expensive of breath: flautists have to breathe far more frequently than oboists or trumpeters or hornists. This very breathiness is part of its Marsyan aspect, the player’s lungs are always on display, and a certain awareness of panting is always built into the listener’s response to the music. But Varèse makes it possible for the player to disguise the intakes of breath, as if the piece were written for some superhuman player who never had to inhale. I have been speaking of *Density 21.5* as a

coldly expressive piece, a piece expressive of metallicness itself; but maybe it would be better to speak of it not in terms of expression at all, but in terms of a new variant on the celestial aspect of the flute—maybe the composition is another Dance of the Blessed Spirits, translated into some shimmer or shiver of the inorganic.

In some later pieces, the panting quality is so far in the foreground that the listener scarcely hears music at all. For example, consider a piece by Salvatore Sciarrino, *Frammento e Adagio* for flute and orchestra (1991): Sciarrino is fond of asking flautists to do to their flutes a number of things that god and Herr Boehm never intended, such as fingering for percussive effect, or blowing through the body of the flute instead of the mouthpiece. It sometimes sounds as if Sciarrino were reversing the whole evolution of the flute from reed or wood pipe to a complex contrivance of keyed metal: the flute reverts to some crude tube that a satyr might tentatively try to make a sound on, a frustrated puffing. The pan-pipes undergo a reverse metamorphosis, turn back into the nymph Syrinx, who can be wetly kissed, but not blown. In one of his most remarkable compositions, *Hermes* for solo flute (1984), Sciarrino juxtaposes the faint pure arpeggios of the modern flute with notes that are distorted, cracked, without a centered pitch, as if the half-shaped reed were trying to drown out its elegant successor. It is a sort of dialogue between two different modalities of wind: pure and impure, the blessed spirits and Marsyas. But Marsyas's urgencies grow more and more pronounced as the piece continues; here, as in many compositions of the late twentieth century, the satyr with his lewd grin vanquishes the noble Apollo.

Now I come to our main theme for today, the way that Modernist poets, particularly William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound, use flutes to depict a complicated interaction between the artificial and the natural; between the celestial and the sexual; between East and West. There is in fact very little of the West in Modernist flute-poetics: it is an orientalizing sort of instrument, as if every Eastern scene came decorated with a flute player providing a soft continuo for the proceedings.

Pound was a composer as well as a poet, and, in his opera *Le testament*, based on the sex-driven, death-driven poetry of François Villon, whose verse cuts close to the bone. Before the opening of the first song there are two bars for drum and flute: the drum taps out four sixteenth notes, which, with a final sixteenth-note rest, are gathered into a quintuplet; after five of these quintuplets, the flute plays three glissandi down the span of a fifth, from E to A. This odd figure appears at several places in the score: for example, after the *Ballade des dames du temps jadis*, where it is labeled, "Inside brothel," and we are told that the flute is a "nose flute" and the drumbeat is to be played by "small African drums." I have myself studied the flute and the recorder, and I can tell you that I grow somewhat uneasy at the thought of sticking a flute up my nose and breathing into it—it's an invasive, transgressive way of playing an instrument, a little too far into the inside of my body, more like an intubation than like a musical act. But tootling a flute shoved up your nose makes, in a certain sense, the perfect music for a brothel: and the whole scene suggests Pan playing Syrinx, a breathing that is a having-sex by different means.

In his poetry, Pound's flute music comes in two distinct genres, both exotic, both highly localized. The first genre concerns the half-western, half-eastern world of classical Greece and Hellenized Rome. Here, as in *Le testament*, the flute music has a strong erotic charge:

Giving perfume,
 and where was nothing
now is furry assemblage
 and in the boughs now are voices
grey wing, black wing, black wing shot with crimson
and the umbrella pines
 as in Palatine,
as in pineta. χελιδών, χελιδών
For the procession of Corpus
 Come now banners
comes flute tone
 ο□ χθόνιοι
To new forest,
 Thick smoke, purple, rising
bright flame now on the altar
 the crystal funnel of air
out of Erebus, the delivered,
 Tyro, Alcmene, free now, ascending ...

Though this passage was written long after the force of the Vorticist movement was spent, it may be the supreme moment of Vorticism. According to one of Pound's Vorticist manifestoes of 1914, "The image [i.e., the poet's pigment] is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. In decency one can only call it a VORTEX" (*EPVA*, p. 207 [1914]). Here in Canto XC, the crystal funnel is like the tip of a tornado that touches the earth, and opens up a strange subtextual space, an underwhere, from which nymphs and other figures of myth spiral up into the sky. Vorticism pertains to the bringing-to-bear of great resources of energy upon a single point: and the flute-music, and the fragrance of myrrh and olibanum, and the processing banners all lend their strength to this great effort. In Canto XXV, the flute's tones become a musical score projected visually onto the air; here the flute and the birdsongs and the sound of the lovely Greek word *chelidon* (swallow) and the perfumes and the visual emblems all commingle and summon. For Pound, the sound of the flute has an almost gluey aspect: it attracts and holds images of smell and sight into a rich pan-sensual complex. The flute tends to participate in a synesthetic matrix, in which all sense organs are engaged. Note, please, that the procession in this poem is the procession of Corpus—the procession of the body, not necessarily that of Corpus Christi, the body of Christ. The flute seems to tease goddesses into being, but there is nothing abstract, nothing extramundane, nothing too far from the body's urgencies; the most emphatic spirits present are *hoi chthonioi*, the spirits of the earth.

Now we come to the second genre of Pound's poetical flutes. The flutes of the Cantos borrow their tunes, their esemplastic force, from the flutes of Asia—specifically, from the Chinese flutes that Pound had evoked in the act of translating the poems that appear in *Cathay* (1915). “The River Song,” in particular, is a flute-haunted poem:

This boat is of shato-wood, and its gunwales are cut magnolia,
Musicians with jeweled flutes and with pipes of gold
Fill full the sides in rows, and our wine

Is rich for a thousand cups.
We carry singing girls, drift with the drifting water ...
Kutsu's prose song
Hangs with the sun and moon.

[illegible]

And I have moped in the Emperor's garden, awaiting an order-
to-write!
I looked at the dragon-pond, with its willow-colored water
Just reflecting in the sky's tinge,
And heard the five-score nightingales aimlessly singing.

Vine strings a hundred feet long hang down from carved railings,
And high over the willows, the fine birds sing to each other, and
listen,
Crying—'Kwan, Kuan,' for the early wind, and the feel of it.
The wind bundles itself into a bluish cloud and wanders off.
Over a thousand gates. over a thousand doors are the sounds of
spring singing,
And the Emperor is at Ko....
He goes out to Hori, to look at the wing-flapping storks,
He returns by way of Sei rock, to hear the new nightingales,
For the gardens of Jo-run are full of new nightingales,
Their sound is mixed in this flute,
Their voice is in the twelve pipes here.

This is an elusive poem, partly because Pound unwittingly conflated two distinct poems by Li Po, partly because the verse movement keeps shivering away, slithering away from one theme as soon as it is touched: each of the poem's notes sets other notes vibrating. The hundred-foot vine strings seem to represent a sort of giant zither or harp, ready to respond to the poem's music, and, if we imagine them as festoons, they also seem to represent the general looping aspect, the unpredictable recurrences of things, just as nature itself is unpredictably recurrent.

The poem is an exercise in fugitive harmonies. The world seems caught up in an act of listening to itself: the slightest change in one thing creates subtle adjustments in everything else. The poet draws his pen—and as he assumes the role of artificer, the shift of his arm rocks the barge a bit, and the mountains, or their reflections in the water, seem to tremble. The act of singing, or the act of writing, changes the aspect of nature—this is as close as Pound gets to Wallace Stevens, whose famous jar tames the Tennessee wilderness, unslovens it. Kutsu's prose song becomes a physical object, pasted onto the sky, "hung with the sun and moon." While the poet awaits the Emperor's command to write, the nightingales sing aimlessly; but when the Emperor appears,

the nightingales' song seems to relocate itself, get enclosed in the flute's pipes: the flute arrests the lovely birdsong, puts it in order, assimilates it into itself. Then, it was aimless; now, it is art. We do not learn whether the poet has yet received from the Emperor an explicit order-to-write, but the sense of ever-heightening artifice is strong: the improvised, delicately evanescent harmonies of the poem's beginning are become ever more subject to human control, ever more tightly organized. The flute endows the nightingales' song with human meaning—it is as if mere nature-noise were enchanted by art, transformed into art.

All Asia, in Pound's imagination, is a continent in which flutes have aesthetic power, power to impose a design on external nature. In 1916 Pound published a volume of translations of Japanese Noh plays, made, like the *Cathay* translations, from the notes of Fenollosa; and Pound's Japan is much like the China of "The River Song":

The flower of waves-reflected
Is on his white garment;
That pattern covers the sleeve.
The land is alive with flute-sounds,
With the song of various pipes
The land is a-quiver,
And even the wild sea at Suma
Is full of resonant quiet. (*Translations*, p. 235)

This is a "Chorus (*accompanying and describing the dance*)" from the Noh play *Suma Genji*; here the immortal spirit Genji dances "the blue dance of the sea waves." As the dance evokes the surges, the wave-rhythm abstracted from the waves themselves, the flutes tame the wild sea into a state of tremulous calm, just as the real waves turn into pattern-elements on the sleeve of a costume.

Still more remarkable is the aesthetic transform in Pound's translation of the play *Shojo*:

The thin leaves of ashi, the leaves of the river-reeds, are like flute-notes. The waves are like little drums. (*Translations*, p. 257)

This chorus also accompanies a divine dance. Here the visual field reconstitutes itself as a set of sounds, in the way that an ideogram is a kind of picture that can be pronounced out loud. In an East-Asiatic landscapes the ideograms drawn near the trees sometimes seem to branch out, to exfoliate, as if the inked characters were themselves tree-images with their own pattern of growth. But in this chorus "in praise of the wine-spirit" the leaves of the reeds are read not as words, but as music, as if they were notations for a flute score imprinted in the landscape itself.

In other Noh plays the flute's melody seems to create the space in which all things constitute themselves—an *air* not just in the sense of a tune, but also in the sense of the whole atmosphere:

A flute's voice has moved the clouds of Shushinrei. (*Tsunemasa*, in *Translations*, p. 266)

Nor is this rock of earth overmuch worn by the brushing of that feather-mantle, the feathery skirt of the stars ... There is a magic song from the east, the voices of many and many: and flute and sho, filling the space beyond the cloud's edge, seven-stringed; dance filling and filling. (*Hagoromo*, in *Translations*, p. 314)

(A sho is a bundle of seventeen tubes, somewhat like Pan-pipes, but played by breathing through a vibrating reed, not by blowing across the top of the tubes.) In these passages the flute's sound

keeps occupying more and more room, until it pushes the clouds out of the way, fills the zodiac with its presence. The sun and moon and stars seem suspended in the flute's giant breath.

Most of the Noh passages I've quoted are from dance choruses that would be chanted while flutes were actually playing. The Noh theatre was more like opera than like spoken drama—the music was integral, and, just as the actors were often members of hereditary actor-clans, so there were clans of flute players: Pound quotes a note of Fenollosa's that translates an "imperial order" from AD 686,

"The male singers and and female flute blowers must make it their own profession, and hand it down to their descendants and make them learn." (*Translations*, p. 357)

The music in actual Noh performances can be rather loud and complicated, but Pound and Yeats seemed to imagine a music refined, spare, a fugitive delicacy: as Yeats said, in the introduction to his imitations (not translations) of Noh plays:

There will be no scenery, for three musicians, whose seeming sun-burned faces will I hope suggest that they have wandered from village to village in some country of our dreams, can describe place and weather, and at moments action, and accompany it all by drum and gong or flute and dulcimer. (*Essays and Introductions*, p. 221)

Yeats imagined these instruments sometimes as providing the accompaniment for the songs; sometimes as providing a kind of punctuation for the action; sometimes as provided a continuous underplay to pantomimed action—as, for example, in *The Cat and the Moon* (1917), where "*Blind Beggar beats Lame Beggar. The beating takes the form of a dance and is accompanied on drum and flute*" (*The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. III: *The Plays*, p. 452).

But Yeats's use of music differed from Pound's. For one thing, Pound, a professional music critic, had a fine ear, and became a skillful self-taught composer, whereas Yeats was tone-deaf and wholly ignorant of music. And yet, as Yeats grew older, music played a larger and larger role in his dramatic art.

Yeats employed professional composers to write music for most of his Noh imitations, beginning with *At the Hawk's Well* in 1917. In that play, the musicians unfold a cloth and position it as the backdrop to the action; their songs help to interpret the narrative content of the play's events, and to cue the audience about what to feel. This provided the basic model for the role of musicians in the subsequent plays. But in the later plays the musicians started to become more and more central to the action. Yeats found that the musicians could act as surrogates for characters too unimportant to appear on stage, and as voices for supernatural creatures whose words needed to be separated from any bodily form. In *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934), one musician reads out the words of the Captain of the Guard, who never actually appears—he is supposed to arrest the Stroller and drag him offstage, but in fact the Stroller has to mime getting dragged offstage, or simply exit—the script gives few clues about stage movements. Meanwhile, the second musician sings the songs of the Queen, who is more a sculpture than a human being: "Why sit you there / Dumb as an image made of wood or metal, / A screen between the living and the dead?" (*The Plays*, p. 494). After the Stroller is executed, his severed head sings a song, ventriloquized by the first musician. It is as if the action of stage takes place within the confines of the music—the spoken dialogue keeps struggling for a little space in which it can speak itself, but eternity's music keeps drowning out the speech of time.

In Yeats's last plays, the flute asserts itself with special potency. In *The Death of Cuchulain*, the Goddess of Death—"A woman that has an eye in the middle of her forehead, / A woman that is headed like a crow" (*The Plays*, p. 548) holds up Cuchulain's head, in the form of a black parallelogram; she puts it on the floor, and, as she dances in front of it, the audience hears "a few faint bird notes" (*The Plays*, p. 553), presumably played by a pipe—among the play's musicians are a piper and a drummer. Yeats described something similar in the poem "Cuchulain Comforted," written two weeks before he died, where he remarks of the spirits of the dead, "They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds." Yeats considered the passage from death to life as a passage from realism into abstraction—parallelograms, a half-audible flute tone. Music becomes an abstraction of speech. I spoke earlier of the way that flute music represented either celestial purity or the sound of the deep body—and here it seems that Yeats conceived flute music as the speech of heaven.

But for the unchristian Yeats the afterlife is an intensely carnal place. In his late play *The Herne's Egg* (1938), Attracta, the priestess of the heron-god known as the Great Herne, plays a special flute:

Corney. A flute lies there upon the rock
Carved out of a herne's thigh.
Go pick it up and play the tune
My mother calls 'The Great Herne's Feather' ...

Attracta. Strong sinew and soft flesh
Are foliage round the shaft
Before the arrowsmith
Has stripped it, and I pray
That I, all foliage gone,
May shoot into my joy—

[*Sound of a flute, playing 'The Great Herne's Feather'*

(*The Plays*, pp. 511, 516-17)

The flute is no longer at the margins of the stage, in the hand of a musician; it has encroached onto the stage space, become one of the play's chief props. Attracta has special access to the world beyond the grave, and her flute can summon the god; but she conceives the immanence of the Great Herne almost completely in terms of orgasm. From her point of view the Great Herne's thunderbolt descends to her in a trance at blue-black midnight; but from the point of view of the other actors she is simply gang-raped by seven soldiers. At the play's end the hero Congal dies, and Attracta hopes that she will be able to reincarnate him if one of his soldiers agrees to have sex with her; but before they have a go at it, two lustful donkeys copulate, and poor Congal will have to be reborn as an ass.

The Herne's Egg belongs to a genre almost unknown outside the work of Yeats: the apocalyptic farce. Every event of the play can be conceived either as a peculiar sort of sacred mystery, or as a lunatic sex comedy: for Yeats the shiver of the extraterrestrial was intensified by a certain smell of dung and sweat and semen. You can read the play as an exegesis of the divine, along the lines of *A Vision*, or you can read the play according to Freud, as Congal himself does:

Women thrown into despair
By the winter of their virginity

Take its abominable snow,
As boys take common snow, and make
An image of god or bird or beast
To feed their sensuality ... (*The Plays*, p. 513)

The flute, with its twi-formed nature, half belong to the calm cloudless heavenly sky, half belonging to Pan's earth and sexual revelry, was just the right instrument to negotiate this odd hermeneutic. The only really gifted composer to work with Yeats on his Noh imitation was Pound's friend George Antheil, who wrote the music for *Fighting the Waves* (1929). In that play, Cuchulain is torn between his love for Emer, his mortal wife, and his fascination with the goddess Fand. In Antheil's dance for Fand the flute is especially prominent; there is much chromaticism here, as in Debussy's *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune*, but here there is no languor: the seduction here feels urgent, irresistible. The goddess, with a costume that suggests "gold or bronze or brass or silver ... more an idol than a human being" (*The Plays*, p. 461), sounds something like a belly-dancer, to judge from the music.

In a poem from 1916, Yeats wrote:

I would find by the edge of that water
The collar-bone of a hare
Worn thin by the lapping of water,
And pierce it through with a gimlet and stare
At the old bitter world where they marry in churches,
And laugh over the untroubled water
At all who marry in churches,
Through the white thin bone of a hare. ("The Collar-Bone of a Hare")

You can open a hole in an animal's bone and gaze at vision. In the body's pith there is wisdom: as Yeats wrote in 1934,

God guard me from those thoughts men think
In the mind alone;
He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in a marrow-bone ... ("A Prayer for Old Age")

To think in a marrow-bone is to think with a potential flute. Tibetan Buddhists evoke spirits with a trumpet called the kangling, made out of a human femur. Your body is itself a little orchestra, full of trumpets and flutes and gut strings; and the Modernists looked to the poetry of Asia to help them learn how to play it.